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CHAPTER II

SOCIAL SURVEY

Population

THE population of Arabia cannot be estimated with any approach to accuracy. It is usually guessed to be from five to eight millions. The lower of these figures is probably nearest to the truth. If we allow two and a half millions of settled and nomadic folk to the whole Red Sea slope from Midian to Yemen (the last-named, with Asir, holding two-thirds of the total); one and a half to the southern districts and Gulf littoral, inclusive of Hadhramaut (Oman alone has about half a million); half a million to all the Central settled districts together; and one million Central nomads, we are probably over the mark.

Nomadic Folk.

The physical conditions of most parts of the peninsula constrain the majority of inhabitants (where any there are) to a nomadic life; and this, owing to the virtual impossibility of increasing the food-producing area anywhere, must be their lot permanently, unless they emigrate. Emigration, in any case, is constantly taking place, as a result of the high natality which has been attributed in Chapter I to the inhabitants of the Central steppes and oases: and it makes the peninsula a great source of disquiet to all neighbouring lands. The surplus population usually remains for some time within the peninsula, gradually accumulating and tending to form new nomadic groups, which try to establish rights to wells and pasturage already occupied. At last, the action of some tribe or tribes, or sheer want, forces them out, with all their predatory habits and defective experience of settled life, towards the borders of Egypt, Syria, or Mesopotamia.

In historic times, for example, the settlement of the NW. African littoral by Arabs is known to have been due to a forcible expulsion of surplus population from the peninsula, carried out by certain of the stronger tribes. The overflow of the Shammar into Mesopotamia and of the Anazah tribes into the Hamād are also instances in point. As for earlier times, the Semitic invasions of Babylonia, the

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Canaanite invasion of Syria, the Hyksos invasion of Egypt, and the Hebrew invasion of Palestine are also to be explained by similar antecedent events in Arabia.

The distribution, grouping, character, and resources of the several tribes are the subject of a subsequent chapter (III); and their relation to particular localities will be stated in the special chapters on the different provinces.

It would be beyond the scope of this Handbook to give a detailed description of Bedouin society; and mere generalities about it are of little service. It is perhaps, however, worth while to say something about those features and customs of Bedouin life which most directly affect the reception and entertainment of strangers, and should, therefore, be known before contact. Dictated by similar necessities, these are more or less common to all tribesmen. For all the rest, study of Doughty's *Arabia Deserta* cannot be too strongly recommended. Pretty well everything that needs to be known about Bedouin life can be found there by a patient reader.

Arabia is 'a land of ancient violence'. For this state of things geographical conditions are largely responsible. Only in very few, rare, and narrow districts is it possible to derive from the soil, not a superfluity, entailing wealth, leisure, and consequent civilization, but anything better than hand-to-mouth existence in full sight of starvation. Agriculture is impossible in three-quarters of the total area, and man must live on peripatetic food pastured on such thin and evanescent vegetation that a single family has to keep on the move in order to live. Water again, the prime condition of existence, is to be found for the most part only very occasionally in deep wells, or rain-pools, and this under a subtropical sun. Scanty sources have to be guarded with the most jealous exclusiveness. The regions over which these conditions prevail usually offer few or none of those natural features which serve elsewhere to protect or conceal; and in their vast extent and distribution they impinge so generally on the few fertile districts, or so often encircle these, that hardly any part of Arabia is altogether unaffected by the inevitable social features of life on steppe and desert.

The most obvious of these features is suspicion. Every man is treated as a potential enemy, till he shows evidence to the contrary. He is kept at a distance until his person or his authority can be recognized. Therefore, in approaching Bedouins, it is as prudent to go slow and give them time as in approaching a sentry in a war-area. Disregard of this advice will result in fight or flight, according to circumstances. While all Bedouins are instinctively suspicious of, and hostile to, the unknown, various